

Conference Paper

Culture at the Periphery: The Challenges and the Opportunities (The Case of Sverdlovsk Oblast)

Dobreytsina L. E.

Assistant Professor, Ural Federal University, Yekaterinburg, Russia

Abstract

Using the case of Sverdlovsk region as an example, the paper analyses the issues of uneven regional cultural development. The author discusses the need to use a bi-directional approach for involving peripheral cities in contemporary cultural process: first, by increasing availability of the center's cultural products in the peripheral regions and, second, by encouraging the original regional cultural production. In both cases it important to utilize opportunities provided by physical and digital cultural space.

Keywords: cultural policy, cultural capital, regional culture, the Urals.

Corresponding Author:

Dobreytsina L. E.

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1. Introduction

One of the key challenges in contemporary Russian culture is the issue of uneven development between regions. The 2014 "Basic Law on Cultural Policy of Russian Federation" lists among the goals of cultural policy "creating conditions under which every individual can realize their creative potential; providing citizens with access to knowledge, information, cultural values and goods" [4], while the first principle is the "territorial and social equality of all citizens... in realization of their right of access to cultural values, participation in cultural life and use of cultural organizations" [4]. However, the issue remains and is acknowledged both by authorities, cultural professionals and ordinary citizens. There are several objective reasons for the lingering inequality, and one of the most important is the vastness of Russian territory and barriers to access for faraway regions. However, this challenge has to be met, because the consequences of such inequality may be severe, up to and including the development of highly distinctive regional cultures, with people from different regions failing to understand each other and living in different cultural worlds. This, in turn, would be dangerous for the national unity, which in "Basic Law..." is described as one of the priorities: "...the state... acknowledges it (culture)... as a pillar of unified cultural space and territorial integrity of Russia" [4].

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2. Methods

This paper focuses on the contemporary Russian provincial cultural space, with particular attention given to the issue of uneven cultural development in Sverdlovsk region. The goal of this paper is to delineate the possible solutions for the cultural challenges faced by the Sverdlovsk region due to uneven development of its territory.

Methods used here are: descriptive, comparative analysis, analysis of documents, systematic analysis.

3. Discussion

The current situation in Ural region is far removed from the realization of goals and principles of equal access proclaimed by the federal document. Among major challenges and risks of regional development, State Program “Cultural Development of Sverdlovsk Region till 2024” lists “underdeveloped cultural demands of the part of population; uneven sociocultural development of different municipal territories...; diminishing access to cultural leisure in rural communities and small town settlements...; unsatisfactory conditions of the majority of cultural organizations under municipal jurisdiction – the lack of common information space that would bring together the entire cultural sphere of Sverdlovsk region” [3, p. 11]. It is easy to conclude that “underdeveloped cultural demands of the part of the population” are the direct result of the lack of cultural benefits and all other factors listed in this quotation.

The State Program envisages several solutions for this problem. The first one is to increase the number of travelling exhibitions, as well as guest performances in theater and concerts. The document states that “only 8 out of 47 cities and towns of the region have their own theaters, while the residents of other localities have almost no access to theater services. Since 2010 the geographical scope of regional theaters’ guest performances has diminished considerably, the number of performances given for rural communities is decreasing” [3, p. 6]. Here some positive developments have occurred. For example, periodic tours of the musicians from Sverdlovsk Philharmonic Hall and the artists of the Sverdlovsk Theater of Musical Comedy. Since 2016, some of the screenings of the “Russia” Documentary Film Festival traditionally based in Ekaterinburg took place in Novouralsk and Nizhny Tagil. Ural Industrial Biennial of Contemporary Art features many regional cities and towns. Still, these are one-time events. Not all localities have resources to accommodate guest theater or music performances or exhibitions: many lack suitable buildings, concert halls, or properly equipped stages. In the State Program

for the Cultural Development of the Sverdlovsk Region “weak material and technical infrastructure of cultural institutions” is listed as one of the challenging factors [3, p. 11].

Many believe that the solution lies in digital space. Virtual exhibitions and museums, the “Virtual Concert Hall” of Sverdlovsk Philharmonic Hall, online broadcasting of philharmonic concerts, digitalization of the museum and library collections – all of these are different ways to overcome cultural and information gap between the territories.

The movement of cultural organizations from the center to the periphery constitutes only one aspect of the problem. Another aspect is the actualization of the local cultural potential: small cities and towns can possess their own well-developed cultural scene instead of living “from one guest performance to another” or finding cultural opportunities online. State program of the Sverdlovsk region notes that the “activation of the population’s interest in the museums is connected to the latter’s exhibition activity and their use of contemporary information and communication technologies” [3, p. 7]. The gap between cultural organizations of a contemporary megapolis (Ekaterinburg) and the other municipalities in the region is particularly evident in their work with the public. With rare exception, cultural organizations are “invisible and unknown” in the situation that requires widespread publicity and competition for the attention of local residents, both in physical and in digital space. The state programs lists among the factors hindering cultural development the fact that “the majority of subjects of cultural activity lack strategies for social promotion of their own cultural products, for the development of positive image both of cultural organizations and the industry in general [3, p. 10], as well as the “underdevelopment of non-commercial cultural sector” [3, p. 11]. It is no coincidence that the art of promoting to the public/consumers is becoming increasingly important in the education of future cultural workers. This theme also features in standalone events – for example, in “Kulturalika” Cultural Forum (Ekaterinburg, 2018, 2019). A special workshop focused on the topic “PR, Advertising SMM – 2019 Trends and the Ways to Tell the World about Yourself” [1]. A simple fact that nobody will come if nobody knows about your organization is only slowly becoming accepted by the provincial cultural workers. The justification given is often the lack of funds for advertisement. Here also the Internet provides important opportunities. Many cultural organizations promote their efforts on social media and major municipal and regional websites. Organizational websites are also important. However, while in recent years the majority of cultural organizations in Sverdlovsk region have established their own websites, information on these pages is updated haphazardly, often with serious delays: this, of course, makes such resources much less useful. They also should feature on the websites advertising regional tourism.

Another equally pressing issue is funding, which is all but absent for the purposes of cultural development in distant territories. The theme of one of Kulturalika's roundtables was "Money – Best Practices for Business and Culture Collaboration" [1]: here among possible sponsors were listed the state, business, private sponsors, visitors, grantmakers. Internet advertising both for cultural organizations and for cultural events could become a basis for crowdfunding. Moreover, thanks to the scope of the Internet, sponsors could include not only local population (which usually has few well-off residents), but also cultural connoisseurs and socially responsible people from anywhere.

It is an acknowledged fact that if a locality lacks resources to establish a permanent cultural center of good enough quality, another possibility is to develop such territory through interesting events and festivals. In 1985, European Union launched the program "European Capital of Culture" [5], which annually designates a new cultural capital among the non-capital cities. Participants of the program present their cultural projects. The winners receive grants to realize their projects that should facilitate the city's development, increase its attractiveness, satisfy cultural demands of local residents etc. Throughout the decades of the program's existence, many small cities experienced major transformation.

This European experience has already been applied in some Russian regions, in particular, in Perm Krai, a neighbor of Sverdlovsk region. Here the project "Cultural Capital of Prikamye" has been operating since 2007 as part of the state program "Perm Krai – Territory of Culture". Thanks to this project, many cities and towns of the region received major boost in their development and acquired interesting cultural objects, while many events held as part of the competition turned into milestones. "The number of participants had been growing annually, as well as the quality of the projects – all of this thanks to the extensive work of the program's managers, methodical workshops for the participants, expert visits to evaluate cultural potential, and wide publicity" [2]. Around 2013, the local authorities officially announced the termination of the program citing financial difficulties. In 2017–2018 the project "Cultural Capital of Prikamye" again received support from the local regional authorities and seems to have got its second wind. It would perhaps be useful for the Sverdlovsk region to adapt this practice, especially because both regions face similar challenges.

4. Conclusions

Global practice confirms that the remote territories possess diverse opportunities for cultural development. However, to make them a reality, comprehensive cultural policy

is required - a policy that relies on internal regional resources and capabilities, as well as uses all available means of self-representation, including digital.

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